

# Hither & Thither

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## Stress in the Workplace

By Gary W. Helmer

Stress is a pathological, generally undesirable, reaction to psychological, social, occupational, or environmental stimuli. Most commonly defined as the reaction of the human organism to any threatening situation, stress is an individual-based problem rooted in a person's lifestyle, psychological makeup, and personality.

### Sources of Stress in the Workplace

Numerous events in our lives cause stress. Referred to as stressors, these events can be internal or external in nature.

#### Common Sources of Stressors

- Physical working conditions
- Work (over)load
- Role ambiguity
- Lack of feedback
- Personality clashes
- Personal and family problems
- Role conflicts
- Mergers
- Downsizing and layoffs
- Employee benefits
- Office politics, favoritism
- Task complexity
- Control of the job
- Feeling of responsibility
- Job security
- Extraneous demands
- Psychological support
- Environmental safety
- Fast-paced work
- Worker reaction to changes
- Lack of advancement potential
- Operational tempo

#### How the Body Reacts

Everyone is different and the intensity of each reaction to stress can vary significantly. Some people are said to "thrive on stress" (a

misnomer) while others cannot handle even minimal stress.

Psychological: Anxiety, guilt, fear, irritability, sadness, defensiveness, anger, hypersensitivity, apathy, depression, slowed thinking or racing thoughts, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, worthlessness, lack of direction, or insecurity.

Behavioral: Trembling, prone to accidents, overeating or loss of appetite, impatience, quickness to argue or lash out, procrastination, increased use of alcohol or drugs, increase smoking, withdrawal or isolation from others, neglect of responsibilities, poor job performance, lack of personal hygiene, and change in relationships.

Cognitive: Loss of concentration or ability to reason effectively.

Physiological: Headaches, grinding of teeth, tight and/or dry throat, clenched jaws, chest pain, shortness of breath, pounding heart, high blood pressure, muscle aches, indigestion, constipation or diarrhea, increase perspiration, fatigue, insomnia, and frequent illness.

Organizational: Absenteeism, reduced production, waning job performance, and lack of teamwork or cooperation.

### Stages of Stress

Stage of Alarm: The alarm reaction occurs when the stress of a threat is sensed. This stage of stress is characterized by pallor, sweating, and an increased heart rate but is usually very short and is preparatory for whatever action is necessary next.

Stage of Resistance: When the stress is maintained, the "stage of resistance" initiates a greater

physical response to counteract it or resist it. All alarm symptoms dissipate, and the body adapts to the stress. The adaptability of each person varies widely but learning to acclimatize is essential in dealing with harmful stress.

Stage of Exhaustion: Eventually the body can no longer adapt to sustained stress and transitions into the "stage of exhaustion." This stage is characterized by psychosomatic responses such as gastric ulcers, colitis, rashes, and autoimmune disorders. Heredity may exacerbate this phase of the process as it is believed that some persons are predisposed to such illnesses. Also, smoking, drinking, and other personal habits will influence the onset of these disorders.

### Dealing with Stress

There are several options available to an individual in dealing with stress.

- First, learn to do away with stress – this is unlikely and nearly impossible to accomplish.
- Since doing away with stress cannot work, the individual might try to avoid stressful situations - equally unlikely.
- Another avenue might be to learn to adapt to being ill because of the stress - a highly undesirable option.
- Finally, the only option of any viable consequence is to learn to adapt to the stress - the optimal choice.

### Measuring Stress in the Workplace

Subjective Ratings: Workers are asked to rate their perceived level of workload, which is then viewed as a direct reflection of workplace stress. This type of data

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is obviously subjective and state-dependent or, in other words, directly related to the state under which they are collected.

Behavioral Time-Sharing: This technique requires the simultaneous performance of two tasks, one considered primary and the other secondary. The decrease in performance efficiency of the secondary task is measured and then considered the index of workload. Workload is thought to increase as behavioral time-sharing increases.

Psycho-physiological: Simultaneous measurement of heart rate and brain waves are required to produce an interpretation of the indexes of mental workload and workplace stress.

## The Effects of Shift Work

Shift work can and does require some people to work when others are sleeping or resting. In many cases, shift work can rotate between several different start and stop times that can vary eight hours or more.

The human body operates on a 90-minute rhythm of activity followed by some form of rest. The body's 24-hour clock (circadian cycle) governs blood pressure, heart rate, body temperature, and elimination of wastes. This internal clock is regulated by light and dark with a natural desire to sleep at night and be active during daylight hours.

Workers with rotating shifts have consistently reported lower job satisfaction than those workers on day-shift jobs. Rotating shifts over an extended period of time (weeks) can desensitize the circadian rhythms of an individual and result in a measurable loss of productivity, increase in accidents, and an increase in subjective discomfort.

## Helpful Hints

When shift work is a reality:

- Workers need to try and sleep/rest the same time each day.
- Never sleep on a full stomach.
- Use blackout curtains/shades/blinds or an eye mask when sleeping during daylight.
- Wake up to bright lights and lively music.
- Take a cool shower to invigorate the body.

## Improving Safety by Reducing Stress

There are a number of ways to reduce stress in the workplace that are worth mentioning.

- Training: Training can help a person recognize and deal with stress in an effective manner. Employees also need to know what is expected of them and be recognized when they perform in an outstanding manner.
- Job Autonomy: A manager can help employees realize their full potential by giving them job autonomy - more control over their jobs.
- Physical Stress: Physical stress can be reduced by the establishment of a sound safety and health program that incorporates an environment of cooperation between managers-workers and workers-coworkers.
- Controlled Pace: Organizational approaches to coping with work place stress include avoiding monotonous, mechanically controlled pace, standardized motion patterns, and constant

repetition of short-cycle operations.

- Delegating Responsibility: One of the best ways to respond to a stressful workload is to delegate responsibility instead of carrying the entire load.

## Recommended Strategies

- Management recognition of stressors.
- Mental health benefits provided all employees.
- Formal employee communications program.
- Employees offered information on how to cope.
- Job descriptions clearly define responsibilities.
- Open line of communications between employees and management.
- Employees free to talk during work
- Exercise and stress reduction programs.
- Reward for accomplishments.
- Work rules published and understood by all employees.
- Child-care offered.
- Eldercare programs.
- Flexible working hours/shifts.
- Perks granted fairly and equally.
- Training and technology access.
- Work and personal support groups.
- Break areas for rest and relaxation.
- Ergonomically friendly workstations.
- Personal items encouraged.
- Humor and socialization encouraged.

## Self-Care Tips

- Take care of yourself by getting good and adequate exercise, regular sleep and rest, and eating balanced meals.

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- Develop friendships or relationships with persons you are able to confide in about important aspects of the job and perhaps your personal life.
- Take time off to "smell the roses." Take vacations or long weekends away from your normal environment and relax.
- Manage your time by setting realistic goals and deadlines. Plan projects accordingly and complete "must do" items first. Schedule difficult tasks for the time of day you are normally most productive and tackle easy tasks during that period where you are less motivated or lack energy.
- Set limits and learn to politely say "no" when it is necessary.
- Choose battles wisely and avoid rushing to argue every time someone does not see it your way. Always keep a cool head and save the argument for things that really matter.
- Use calming skills to protect from giving in to the first impulse. Always give anger time to subside - count to ten if necessary.
- Don't use drugs or alcohol as they can and do impair your judgment and reasoning capacity.
- Look for less stressful options in the job arena if yours' tends to stay stressful.
- Seek help when all else fails. Never be afraid to admit that you may need professional advice on learning to deal with stress.

Stress is a fact of life and varies significantly from individual to individual. The key to successfully managing stress is to learn to replace bad or negative stress with good or positive stress. Learning what good stress is for you

personally will be a huge step toward learning to deal with the bad stress. *gwh/03*

## Teeth Grinding, Workplace Stress Go Hand in Hand

*By Stephanie Riesenman*

People who frequently grind their teeth are more likely to feel stressed out at work than those who don't clench their teeth, according to Finnish researchers. What's more, women are more likely than men to say that they grind their teeth and that their jobs are stressful, they report.

"We're an uptight and fast-run society," said Dr. Richard Price, consumer advisor for the American Dental Association. In an interview with Reuters Health, Price said tooth grinding is something that worsens as society becomes more stressful in general.

In the study, researchers gave questionnaires to more than 1,300 managers, journalists, technicians, researchers, administrators, and maintenance employees at the Finnish Broadcasting Company. The respondents had to decide if they never, seldom, sometimes, often or continually found themselves grinding their teeth, and they were asked to rate their stress on a scale of one to five.

Women and employees who reported the highest levels of stress were more likely to be teeth grinders than men or their colleagues whose jobs were less stressful, according to the study in the December issue of Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology. Overall, 26% of women said they ground their teeth at least some of the time, compared with 17% of men. Nearly 4% of women and 1%

of men said they ground their teeth continually.

The amount of tooth grinding did not vary according to occupation, but employees who reported higher levels of stress were much more likely to grind their teeth. Both stress and tooth grinding were more common in female employees, regardless of age. These employees also spent more time at their doctors' or dentists' offices.

The researchers note that tooth grinding may be even more common than the survey suggests, given that many people grind their teeth or clench their jaws while they're sleeping.

Symptoms of tooth grinding include a dull headache or sore jaw, and can be confused with temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorder, which is pain and discomfort associated with the joint that hinges the lower jaw. "TMJ problems are the great masquerade," said Price.

With frequent grinding the teeth will often become smoother and the grooves less defined, but most people won't notice the change, Price said. "It probably happens so gradually over time that it appears normal," he said.

Severe cases of tooth grinding can lead to painful gums and eventually loosened or fractured teeth. Many dentists will fit patients for mouth guards that they can wear to bed to protect their teeth.

The best advice for tooth grinders is to get a grip on their stress, not their teeth, according to Price. He suggests that patients find ways to relax, such as physical therapy or exercise to reduce tension. When necessary, muscle relaxants can be prescribed, but often a hot shower or over-the-counter pain reliever

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can be enough to stop the pain, said Price.

"It can be a temporary thing--when patients come in you have to ask them if they're going through a stressful time," said Price. "Usually if we make them aware of it they can stop."

## 20 Stress Relievers

1. Laugh at yourself. For good health laugh at least ten times a day and five of those should be at yourself.
2. Realize that most events in our personal and business lives will fall somewhere on a continuum between very positive and very negative. Find your balance.
3. Do some stretching and breathing exercises every few hours. Being trapped behind a desk or the wheel of a car all day can make the body stiff. Use deep breathing from your stomach to relax you and stretching to loosen the muscles and joints.
4. Keep a fun folder. A collection of pictures, cartoons, or jokes that make you smile or laugh.
5. Give yourself permission to do one thing imperfect each day. Thinking that you have to be perfect is one of the first signs of burn out.
6. Make a list of things that you enjoy and do one of them each day. When was the last time you did something for yourself? Do something each day that improves the quality of your life.
7. Organize a humor library at work - a place that has funny tapes, books, or jokes where people can take a "humor break".
8. Put up a humor bulletin board. Remember, appropriate humor only and no company business!
9. Put a joke of the day on electronic mail. If you don't have electronic mail then pin a joke on the mail man. (I just wanted to see if you were paying attention.)

10. Get the "Far Side" daily calendar on computer. If you can't do that get one for your desk or any daily reminder that brings a smile to your face.

11. Perform a random act of kindness every day. A good opportunity for the "Secret Pal" club.

12. At the cafeteria or snack bar, pay for the person behind you. Go ahead, make their day!

13. Hold the door for someone who doesn't expect it or, give up your seat on the bus or train. Politeness is a smile producer.

14. Wave or say hi to those you pass on the street. This is self-explanatory.

15. Next time you're in a stressful meeting suggest that each person tell their favorite, appropriate story. Something that lightens up the meeting but not distracts from it.

16. Do the unexpected. Be spontaneous. Now!

17. Look for the humor no matter how stressful the situation. Sometimes your best stories come from your worst times.

18. Give up the misguided belief that professionalism equals seriousness or solemnity. "Take your work seriously and yourself lightly." Terminal seriousness causes "hardening of the attitudes".

19. Exercise three times a week. You'll feel great!

20. Smile! Laugh! Enjoy! Don't take life so seriously. So far no one's gotten out of it alive!

## Stressless Websites

Psychology at Work

<http://helping.apa.org/work/stress5.html>

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresswork.html>

Discovery Health

<http://health.discovery.com/convergence/recovery/articles/stressinworkplace/stressinworkplace.html>

Farleigh Dickinson University

<http://www.fdu.edu/newspubs/magazine/99su/stress.html>

Recruiter's World

<http://www.recruitersworld.com/articles/rw/special/stress.asp>

Corporate Comedy

<http://jeffjustice.com/Old%20Site/Articles.html>

Workplace Stress Relievers

[http://www.idiotsguides.com/Quick-Guides/MG\\_Workplace\\_Stress\\_Relievers/file.htm](http://www.idiotsguides.com/Quick-Guides/MG_Workplace_Stress_Relievers/file.htm)

MEDLINE Plus

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/temporomandibularjointdysfunction.html>

CBS News Report

[http://www.cbc.ca/stories/2002/02/05/military\\_020205](http://www.cbc.ca/stories/2002/02/05/military_020205)

Targeting Stress Workbook

<http://www.hooah4health.com/toolbox/stress/Sec01intro.pdf>

Psychology at Work

<http://helping.apa.org/work/stress5.html>

Stress Management and Emotional Wellness Links

<http://www.imt.net/~randolfi/StressLinks.html>

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**Parting Thought**

**"You don't choose the things you believe in – they choose you."**

**Thanks!**